

Pombo bill would restrict off-reservation Indian casinos

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WASHINGTON - A key House Republican wants to restrict Indian gambling's most controversial trend - tribes moving off their reservations, sometimes into urban areas, to build casinos.

Instead, House Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo, R-Calif., would create "Indian Economic Opportunity Zones" where numerous tribes could build casinos in one area, potentially creating mini-Las Vegases around the country.

The ideas are contained in draft legislation Pombo's committee circulated Thursday in advance of a hearing set for March 17.

Pombo said he is trying to respond to complaints about the spread of off-reservation gambling.

"I don't want to take an opportunity away from someone, but at the same time I think we need to have some control over it," he said in an interview. "The thinking is if we can collocate a number of these, it stops some of the conflicts we have from them trying to locate in other areas."

The vast majority of the nation's 411 tribal casinos are on reservations, but as Indian gambling spreads, tribes are increasingly looking beyond their borders for better locations. Indian gambling pulled in around \$18.5 billion in 2004, nearly double the take from gambling at major Nevada resorts.

Pombo's draft bill would delete a provision in the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act that sets out a narrow set of circumstances under which Indian tribes can build casinos away from their reservations - even in another state.

In most cases, those criteria require that tribes get agreement from the Interior Secretary and the governor of the state where the casino is planned before moving forward.

Under the draft bill, tribes would be able to build casinos away from their reservations only in an "Indian Economic Opportunity Zone" designated by

the Interior Secretary. The secretary would be able to create two such zones per state - one on Indian land and the other on non-Indian land.

The zones would be open for gambling to tribes that don't already have casinos, or agree to close the ones they have. The bill doesn't limit the size of the economic opportunity zones or cap the number of casinos allowed in them.

Approval would be required from the state and from local governments for gambling to go forward in the zones. Now, local communities have little say, in part because tribes are sovereign nations exempt from zoning and other state and local laws.

Pombo's committee has been inundated with complaints about off-reservation gambling, from local communities and from Indian tribes. Some powerful tribes say off-reservation casinos are a public relations disaster. They also can pose unwelcome competition to established tribal casinos.

But Pombo's bill will likely be opposed by some tribes that haven't yet built casinos or are located in remote areas.

The National Indian Gaming Association reacted cautiously, releasing a statement from Chairman Ernie Stevens Jr. saying the group would consult with member tribes before taking a position.

Pombo's bill creates exceptions for landless and newly recognized tribes.